Shunned

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This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places, or events are entirely coincidental.

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It had happened so fast. And paradoxically, it was as though it had occurred in slow motion.

Sabina was the eldest of three, with a brother, Edmund, and sister, Alicia. Their dad had gone off with some young girl, whilst their mother, Maureen, was heavily pregnant with Alicia. He had another family now, and Family One were practically forgotten. Maureen had been attentive to her two younger children, leaving Sabina out in the cold, and Eddie and Alicia had been close to each other, but not to Sabina. There was eleven months between Sabina and her brother, and ten months between Eddie and Alicia, making them, all three, close in age, but in all other respects, there was a distance between Sabina and her siblings.

At seventeen, Sabina had got sick of her role as the family scapegoat. Moved in with then-boyfriend Jimmy, living in some bedsit, just outside Reading town centre. It was far removed from her mum's spacious four bedroom house in the posh part of Tilehurst.

Maureen packed every last belonging of her eldest daughter's, randomly and untidily, into cardboard boxes, insisting that she lacked "the space" to store even a few of Sabina's possessions in the family home. And Sabina was never made to feel welcome there again.

Years later, when both Eddie and Alicia had moved out, Sabina discovered that her brother and sister retained their bedrooms, complete with many of their belongings, and that they were encouraged to stay at their childhood home, as and when they chose to.

Eddie did not give his new address or any contact details to

his elder sister, and Alicia gave an email address and her mobile number, but not her address, and not the landline number. When Eddie's girlfriend had a baby girl, the information was withheld from Sabina. She never had been able to find out what they had called her niece, or anything about the child, and it hurt, because Sabina had no way of comprehending any of it.

Then, one day, out of the blue, Maureen got in touch with her firstborn, via an email, worded icily and abruptly. Her father had died, and she was expected to attend the funeral.

Sabina did not attend the funeral. Her health did not allow it. And her mother and siblings all blamed her, and were critical to members of the extended family, who were also instructed to shun her.

When able to do so, Sabina visited her mother. Her reception was hostile.

"I need answers," said Sabina, joining her mother in the kitchen that was larger than her own entire studio flat. "What am I supposed to have done?"

Predictably, a wall of stony silence was Maureen's response, as per usual.

The kitchen knife caught Sabina's eye.

Maureen was filling the kettle, routinely ignoring her daughter, but Sabina had had enough. The woman was supposed to have given birth to her. She was happy enough to be a mother to Eddie and Alicia. Why this shunning of her eldest child?

No more. Sabina reached out, and grabbed the knife.

Not Going There

Silvia - as passionate and hardworking the petite redhead undoubtedly was, when it came to her full-time job as a legal secretary - was still more passionate about, and devoted to, the small press literary journal, which she edited in her spare time. And, more even than that, Silvia was deeply passionate about her own first novel, the success of which made her delighted and proud.

She had left the office on time, for a change. Half past five, and not a minute later. Silvia had been looking forward to that evening's event, and for once, Hart and Lovegrove Solictors were not her highest priority. The awards ceremony was.

She only wished that there was anyone in her day-to-day life with whom to share her excitement. There was no one. Her father had died, a few years earlier. Her mother was disinterested and dismissive. And Silvia's sister, Briony, although barely thirty, making her three years younger than Silvia, was already married with five children. Bri made it clear, whenever she and her sister spoke, that she was the one with important commitments. In common with their mother, Briony demonstrated little to no interest in Silvia's life and achievements. Bri's world revolved around her husband, Edward, and their three sons and two daughters.

Silvia would ordinarily have talked to her long-term best friend, Helen. But, since becoming engaged recently, Helen was almost as preoccupied as Briony. If a conversation did not revolve around Matthew or weddings, Silvia's friend rapidly lost interest.

Silvia scrolled through the contact list on her phone,

lingering on one name: Daniel.

Silvia resisted the temptation. It simply wasn't worth reopening those wounds. She wasn't going there. She definitely wasn't going there.

The Benefit of the Doubt

Edith was a lanky girl, seemingly quiet. She by no means shared Zoe's love of dancing and various sports. Edith lived on the other side of town, and the two girls might never have met, had Edith's elderly grandmother not lived next door to Zoe's own family.

It started with a football, kicked over the garden fence by Zoe's younger brother, Brian, which resulted in the initial brief exchange between Zoe and Edith.

Afterwards, Brian asked Zoe why she had talked to "that weird girl".

"Because my idiot of a brother kicked a ball over the fence, and I was asking her for it back. And how do you know she's 'weird'?"

Brian shrugged. "She just is. Everyone says so."

"Who's 'everyone'? John Peterson and Anthony Turner?" This with a knowing grin.

"Amongst others," said Brian. "I wouldn't talk to her, that's all I'm saying. Unless you're into making friends with weirdos."

"Probably enough that I have one as a brother."

"Very funny. Yeah, well - don't say I didn't warn you about Edith, anyway."

"You know her name then. You seem very informed about this 'weirdo'."

It turned out that Zoe's best friends, Tanya and Stephanie, shared Brian's misgivings about Edith, but still, not one of them had substantiated their opinions.

Paradoxically, this hostility towards the girl actually inspired Zoe to make an effort. Get to know Edith, who was initially not forthcoming, but who gradually chatted with Zoe.

Edith was, it transpired, the youngest of seven, and the only girl, but she wouldn't talk much about her family. The red flags were present in abundance, all along. And Zoe should have walked away, before it was too late. Yet, she opted to give Edith the benefit of the doubt.